

Solitude:

A Place for Your Soul to Come Out

by Ruth Haley Barton

“The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, self-sufficient. It knows how to survive in hard places. But it is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently by the base of the tree, and fade into our surroundings, the wild animal we seek might put in an appearance.”

—Parker Palmer

I will never forget my first experience with extended solitude. It was a field trip, of sorts, that was part of a seminary class on spiritual formation and our class gathered at a nearby retreat center to spend the day on retreat under the guidance of our beloved professor. The morning was wonderful but, in some ways, very similar to what I had already been experiencing in shorter times of solitude. However, when lunchtime came, we were told that we would eat lunch in silence so as not to interrupt our attention to God by being pulled into social interaction.

Our host guided us to a beautiful dining room with windows on three sides looking out over grounds of the retreat center and the woods beyond. A hot lunch had been prepared and the chairs were set up facing the windows so that each person could look to the outside while they were eating. As we entered into the dining room in silence, I lost my composure (to put it artfully). It was like something broke open inside of me and I was caught completely off guard. Tears started sneaking down my face and I was standing there snuffling with no Kleenex in sight wondering what in the world was happening to me!

The first feeling I could identify was sheer relief knowing that I wasn't going to have to talk to anyone or do anything or serve anyone during this lunch. For once, my place with God was being honored—not managed or directed or interpreted. For once, I wasn't going to have to force myself into someone else's prefabricated plan for my spiritual enrichment! I was so glad we had been instructed not to talk because then no one could intrude by asking me what was wrong and trying to “help.” I needed to be alone with what was happening inside and because I had the space to do so, I was able to begin acknowledging truth that I had not known how to name before.

All of a sudden I was awake and alert to a level of over-stimulation and exhaustion that I had come to associate with normal Christian living. As I let my emotions flow uncensored and stayed with them in God's presence, I could feel the weight of Christian

expectations that I had been carrying around without even being aware of it. There were the expectations around being a godly spouse and a good parent and trying to balance that with the demands of my life in ministry. There was all the busy-ness that went along with church life. There was the book I had just finished that had drained me of every last meaningful word I could think of...There were all of my attempts to be a good neighbor, to be a good Christian, to be a good leader, to be a good everything...

These had worn me down so completely that here I was, overwhelmed with emotion at the simplest gift—someone fixing me a meal and allowing me the freedom to sit in silence with God while I ate it. Nothing to do. Nothing to say. No social interaction to try and figure out. How, I wondered, had my life in Christ gotten reduced to so much busy-ness, so many words, such weighty expectations? How had I gotten this far in the spiritual life without anyone ever having told me that it was o.k. to stop talking and stop doing and just *be* in God's presence? What was I to do with the pent-up longing and frustration that was now expressing itself in tears streaming down my face?

Here was yet another good reason for not talking to each other: it would have been so easy to run away into conversation or to look someplace outside myself for answers. Instead, I had to snuffle my way through lunch and stay present with God, who was my meal-time companion. I had to stay with my longings in his presence and get honest about the ways in which my life *as I was living it* was not congruent with my heart's deepest desires. This was a stunning realization; after all, I had made most of my own choices in life. How had I ended up here? *Lord have mercy.* What was one to *do* with such longing and depth of feeling?

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Most of us are not very good at sitting with longing and desire—our own or someone else's. It feels tender. It feels vulnerable. It feels out of control. It is a place where one human being cannot fix or fill another nor can we fix or fill ourselves. It is a place where only God will do.

The longing for solitude is the longing for God. It is the longing to experience God unmediated by words, theological constructs, religious activity, my own and other's manipulations of my relationship with God. The longing for solitude is also the longing to find ourselves; it is the longing to be in touch with what is most real within us, that which is more solid and enduring than what defines us externally. This is the soul of us, that place at the very center of our being that is known by God, that is grounded in God and is one with God. But it's tricky to get the soul to come out, as Parker Palmer so eloquently describes. We are not very safe for ourselves because our internal experience is one of such critique and judgment and the tender soul does not want to risk it. And unfortunately, a lot of our religious activity is very noisy as well; we're just an organized group of people crashing through the woods together making so much noise that there's not a soul in sight.

There are very few places where the soul is truly safe, where the knowing, the questions, the longings of the soul are welcomed, received and listened to rather than evaluated, judged, or even beaten out of us. The experience I described earlier was a time when my soul “came out” and told me things that it was impossible to know while I was crashing through the woods of my life making so much noise. I imagine my soul crouching under a leafy bush, shaking its head saying, “I just cannot talk to her when she’s like this!”

It took a half a day in solitude capped off by a silent lunch for me to get anywhere near quiet enough on the inside to know what was really going on. And then when I did figure out what was going on, it took more time in solitude to invite God in to that place to help me rather than allowing others to rush in or allowing myself to rush out! As one writer has said, “*You would be surprised at what your soul wants to say to God.*” You would probably be surprised at what God wants to say to your soul as well.

Being With What Is

One of the most important lessons I have learned as a person in ministry is how important it is to have time and space for being with what’s real in my life—to celebrate the joys, grieve the losses, shed my tears, sit with the questions, feel my anger, attend to my loneliness. This kind of “being with what is” is not the same thing as problem-solving or fixing because not everything can be fixed or solved. Rather, it is to allow God to be with me in the midst of what’s real and to wait for him to do what is needed.

There are many verses in Scripture that speak to the importance of waiting for God’s action and initiative in our lives but one of my favorites is a little verse in Exodus 14. The Israelites are literally backed into a corner—which is how we often feel. The Red Sea is in front of them and the Egyptians are gaining on them from behind to destroy them or take them back into captivity. It is a very serious situation and they are already complaining to Moses about the miserable failure their escape plan has turned out to be. Moses says to them, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today...*The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.*” (Exodus 14:13, 14)

Solitude offers us a concrete way of entering into this kind of stillness so that God can come and do what only God can do—in our lives personally and also in our ministries. This may be one of the greatest challenges for Christian leaders because we have this sense that everyone is waiting for *us* to come in and do what *we* can do. I’m not sure we as leaders are capable of being still and letting God fight for us without a discipline to help us do it.

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